

THROTTLE DECISIONS

AN EXAMPLE OF FURTHERING AVALANCHE AWARENESS IN THE MOUNTAIN SNOWMOBILE COMMUNITY THROUGH USE OF SOCIAL COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT:

In 2011, the Search and Rescue Secretariat funded a three-year *Mountain Snowmobiler Avalanche Incident Prevention Project* through the Search and Rescue New Initiatives Fund (SAR NIF).

With respect to avalanche prevention programs, the project application identified that existing programs are not adequately addressing avalanche safety challenges within the mountain snowmobile community (SAR NIF, 2011). The weaknesses in existing prevention programs were seen as being due to the lack of cultural relevance and the overall lack of applicability to the advanced mountain travel that is occurring in this user group (SAR NIF, 2011).

The goal of the three-year project was to address the significant gap between avalanche awareness in the snowmobile community and avalanche incident prevention programs for this group in Canada (SAR NIF, 2011).

The social comparison theory is based on the premise that comparison of one's self to similar others through social comparisons is a psychological process that influences people's judgments, experiences and behavior (Festinger, 1954).

The unique culture of the mountain snowmobile community required project outcomes that would resonate with the user group to maximize culture change opportunities through Festinger's (1954) theory.

Throttle Decisions was one outcome from this three-year project and is a snowmobile based avalanche awareness film series comprised of eight chapters, an outreach module, and a youth module.

Over the past several years, the mountain snowmobile community in Canada has demonstrated a positive shift toward greater avalanche awareness and has demonstrated a strong desire to be involved in avalanche incident prevention initiatives. This is likely attributable to a number of factors, but includes the creation of relevant and applicable prevention programs that include the snowmobile community in their development. Individuals and organizations developing prevention programs for this audience must possess a thorough understanding of this user group's culture and encourage and facilitate their involvement whenever possible.

KEYWORDS: Mountain Snowmobiling; Education; Film; Social comparison theory

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the Search and Rescue Secretariat funded the three-year Mountain Snowmobiler Avalanche Incident Prevention project through the Search and Rescue New Initiatives Fund (SAR

NIF). The project was managed and delivered by the Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC).

The project application identified that existing prevention programs are not adequately addressing avalanche safety challenges within the mountain snowmobile community (SAR NIF, 2011). The weaknesses in existing prevention programs were seen as being due to the lack of cultural relevance and the overall lack of applicability to the advanced mountain travel that is occurring within this user group (SAR NIF, 2011).

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The project application also noted an overall lack of knowledge and understanding of the mountain snowmobiler user group and its associated culture when formulating targeted avalanche prevention resources. This was problematic for creating prevention programs that would resonate with this group (SAR NIF, 2011).

The goal of the three-year project was to address the significant gap between avalanche awareness and incident prevention programs in Canada for the snowmobile user group (SAR NIF, 2011).

Many of the project outcomes utilized concepts of Leon Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory to assist in achieving the overall project goal.

Throttle Decisions was one outcome from this three-year project and is a snowmobile based avalanche awareness film series comprised of eight chapters, an outreach module, and a youth module (shown in Tbl. 1). There is a consistent message within the film for the audience to increase their level of avalanche knowledge through avalanche training.

The film series was created for the following audiences:

- Individual recreationalist
- Avalanche outreach event audio visual aid
- Ancillary resource for snowmobile based avalanche educators
- Youth snowmobile safety and youth avalanche safety educators

This paper will outline how Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory was applied to the development of Throttle Decisions.

Canada has seen a positive shift toward greater avalanche awareness within the snowmobile community. It is important that this progress continue. Prevention programs for this audience must be created with a thorough understanding of this user group's culture and encourage and facilitate their involvement whenever possible to further this positive shift.

2. METHODS

2.1 *Content Development and Project Management*

Project inception and film content involved snowmobilers from the CAC Snowmobile Working Committee ("Sled Com") and snowmobile based avalanche educators. Jeremy Hanke provided

subject matter expertise on behalf of the film production company. Carole Savage managed the project on behalf of the Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC) and provided curriculum content and subject matter feedback through all stages of the project. CAC staff assisted with review of content messaging, promotion, and media release of the product.

2.2 *Project timelines and milestones*

A request for proposals was circulated in October 2012 for film and production services through an open tender bid process. Prospective bidders were provided the requirements for the film content and minimum time durations of each module.

Francois Desrochiers of FD Productions was the winning proponent of the competitive bid process and undertook filming and production for the project.

Filming occurred during the winter of 2012-2013 in three different snow climates in British Columbia. Production and editing occurred during the spring and summer of 2013. The final deliverables were provided in November 2013.

2.3 *Filming and Production*

Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory is based on the premise that comparisons between the self and others to which they can relate is part of human nature and influences people's judgments, experiences and behavior. With respect to abilities, people will seek to compare themselves with others of slightly greater abilities. (Festinger, 1954). Festinger (1954) also noted that if an individual resonates with a group that he sees as important, there is a drive to approach uniformity with that group through a change of opinions and/or abilities. This desire to approach uniformity increases with the perceived level of importance. (Festinger, 1954). If an individual is not able to assimilate with a group that he deems as important, the inability to reach uniformity creates feelings of discomfort in the individual (Festinger, 1954).

Throttle Decisions was created to be a high profile and engaging film series with a cast comprised of well-spoken, charismatic mountain snowmobilers knowledgeable in avalanche safety. These snowmobilers possessed a wide range of avalanche knowledge, from the industry professional level to the recreational level. While there were a variety of riding abilities demonstrated in the film, technical riding was emphasized in the film and

included footage of professional snowmobile athletes.

Most snowmobilers share the common desire to progress in their riding abilities. The intent of the project was not to drive people toward improving their riding ability, but instead for the audience to compare themselves to the film cast's heavy integration of technical riding abilities and avalanche knowledge. It was hoped that this would create a desire for the audience to improve their level of avalanche knowledge as part of their overall desire to approach uniformity with this group.

To further this drive, the avalanche incident and behaviors demonstrating a lack of avalanche awareness in the film were portrayed such that the viewer would be moved to a level of discomfort and consider avoidance of such behaviors in the future.

Festinger (1954) noted that there are nonsocial restraints that can prevent changing of one's ability, but these restraints do not apply to opinions.

Even if an individual viewing the film could not physically change their abilities to the level of any riders shown in *Throttle Decisions*, their opinions and perceptions regarding avalanche safety could still be shifted in a positive direction.

People tend not to compare themselves with people whose opinions or abilities are too divergent from their own (Festinger, 1954).

For this reason, use of CAC staff for film casting was minimized. There was a concern that viewers would not be driven toward social comparison and subsequently change behaviors if they could not identify with the film cast. The CAC staff that were utilized were mountain snowmobilers themselves and/or possessed a strong social presence.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The series resulted in eight chapters, and outreach and youth components (shown in Tab. 1).

The modularized structure of the final product enables replacement or addition of chapters as required.

The series was released in November 2013, at a time when mountain snowmobilers attend snowmobile shows and prepare for the snowmobile season. The series is available on DVD and Vimeo in a viewable and downloadable format.

Tbl. 1: Film Modules

Chapter/Module

Outreach Component

Chapter 1: Gear

Chapter 2: Forecast

Chapter 3: Safe Travel

Chapter 4: Weather

Chapter 5: Snowpack

Chapter 6: Terrain

Chapter 7: Evaluate Hazard

Chapter 8: Rescue

Youth

As of August 2014, approximately 2700 DVD's have been provided to snowmobile avalanche educators, youth avalanche education providers, and the snowmobiling public.

There have been over 43,500 online viewings of the various modules and chapters (Vimeo, 2014). The most popular module with over 25,800 online viewings is the Outreach Component (Vimeo, 2014).

Snowmobile forums, various websites, and social media in Canada, USA, and Scandinavia have provided online links to the film series.

To date, *Throttle Decisions* feedback from the snowmobile audience has been very positive.

Mountain snowmobilers are capable of covering a large amount of terrain that can consist of a variety of elevations and aspects. While there is a module on terrain in the existing chapters, more detail and discussion on terrain management needs to occur. A chapter on terrain management that includes safe group travel habits would be of benefit to address this.

Future projects should consider a comprehensive media plan undertaken by a communications specialist familiar with the user group. This will help to maximize uptake and engagement of the target audience. While it is acknowledged that there is a cost to doing so, *Throttle Decisions* would likely have received additional viewings if this had been undertaken.

4. CONCLUSION

Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory is one theory found to be effective for assisting in a positive cultural shift toward greater avalanche awareness within the mountain snowmobile community. Prior to the creation of the film series, both project authors have utilized this theory extensively in their own avalanche outreach and education presentations. They have found it to be an effective means of driving change within the snowmobile community.

While it is only one product aimed at avalanche prevention for the mountain snowmobile audience, it is hoped that Throttle Decisions will further assist in the user group's awareness and cultural shift toward greater avalanche awareness.

Canada has seen a positive shift toward greater avalanche awareness within the snowmobile community. There are now prevention programs and messaging in existence that speaks to the audience and addresses the advanced mountain travel often occurring within this user group.

It is important that this progress continue to further assist in the cultural shift toward greater avalanche safety. Mountain snowmobiling is a fast growing sport, with new entrants entering the sport every year. Further advances in snowmobile technology make accessing of avalanche terrain easier than it has ever been before.

Continued work in avalanche prevention programs require an understanding of the culture and involvement by members of the user group to maximize effectiveness.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The creation of this document was not supported financially or materially by the ISSW. None of the authors benefit financially from the production or sale of ISSW proceedings nor have they received any related grants or patents.

The opinions expressed within this document are those of its authors. They are not intended to represent the opinions of the Canadian Avalanche Centre or any other avalanche organization.

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